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The ITT Affair: Playing Games With People

It is probably only a matter of time before Ronald Ziegler or Dr. Victor Liszka or Senator Hugh Scott or some other self-appointed spokesman for ITT reveals to us breathlessly that Mrs. Dita Beard is in reality Amelia Earhart. Or that Harold Geneen of ITT is actually a 101-year-old Sioux warrior named Little Big Mouth and that the celebrated Beard memorandum is nothing more than a fragment of his autobiography filched from the files of an editor at McGraw-Hill. You have to wonder, when you reflect upon the record of this case, what these people take us for, with their paper shredders and scatter-shot counterattacks and glib denials, and recurrent need to have their memories "refreshed." And, beyond that, you have to wonder what it is that they are so frightened of.

It is this last question that puzzles us the most, for the text of the memorandum which was attributed to Mrs. Beard by Jack Anderson was available for inspection three weeks ago, when the ITT story first broke; it appeared in this newspaper and others at the time. So it doesn't matter whether the version that Mr. Anderson's assistant Brit Hume showed to Mrs. Beard was the same as the one ultimately published because she could see what he had published.

So if it is a "forgery" and a "fraud" and a "hoax" now, it was all those things then, and she could have saved herself and a lot of other people a great deal of trouble by saying so.

Instead, according to Mr. Anderson, she twice confirmed its authenticity; and according to Dr. Liszka she told him only that she was "upset" when she wrote it. Instead, ITT sent for the paper shredders and told Mrs. Beard, by her account, to "take a vacation," to "get lost," and there then began the first, frantic effort to destroy her reputation and reliability by trying to make her out to be "disturbed" and "irrational" and given to drink "excessively."

Meanwhile the White House has embarked on an almost panicky — and exceedingly clumsy — campaign against Mr. Anderson for irresponsibility, and the press in general for unfairness, and the Democrats for taking partisan joy in pursuing this affair.

Why? And why, for that matter, did Mr. Richard Kleindienst feel obliged to ask for a reopening of the hearings on his nomination to be attorney general, even though Mrs. Beard's memorandum nowhere mentions his name or raises any questions bearing on his fitness for that job.

Surely all this is an excessive response to a memorandum whose author is first pictured as totally unreliable and which is then presented as a "fraud," and one explanation for it may be that the administration and ITT, in their shared contempt for public sensibilities, greatly overestimated the ease with which they would be able to put the ITT affair to rest. Discredit Mrs. Beard, they apparently reasoned, and that would be the end of it. When it wasn't, attention was turned to Mr. Anderson and the press and now the memorandum itself and that hasn't so far succeeded—and should in no way be allowed to—for the simple reason that Mrs. Beard's memorandum has long since ceased to be anything more than incidental to the ITT affair. It was essential, of course, in the sense that it brought the subject up. But the bulk of its substance, which has to do with ITT's contribution to the Republican Party convention this summer in San Diego, has been amply documented elsewhere. It's passing reference to the ITT antitrust case—"I am convinced . . . that our noble commitment has gone a long way toward our negotiations on the mergers eventually coming out as (Mr. Geneen) wants them"—is an expression of a personal opinion, rather than an assertion of a deal. And the wholly unsubstantiated observation that "(Attorney General) Mitchell is definitely helping us," which is the only other hint of a relationship between the contribution and the out-of-court settlement of the ITT antitrust case, is hardly an important piece of evidence.

In short, the Dita Beard story is a sideshow, and always has been, however much the administration would have us believe it to be the main event. What matters in the ITT affair is that a great corporation thought it entirely proper to agree to bankroll the Republican convention at precisely the time it was seeking to negotiate a favorable settlement of its antitrust case with a Republican administration, and that it won the settlement it wanted; that a lot of people high up in the administration, if not Mr. Mitchell, were "definitely helping" ITT to plead its case more effectively, including Mr. Kleindienst who had categorically denied having had anything to do with it; that the White House was thoroughly involved in a process which succeeded in turning the antitrust division away from its declared purpose of seeking a Supreme Court ruling on the case; that Mr. Mitchell's word has been directly contradicted by the lieutenant governor of California.

This much, and more, has already been recorded —without benefit of Mrs. Dita Beard—and quite obviously there is more to be known. For the Senate Judiciary Committee not to press on would be to leave unanswered the question of what there is in the ITT affair for the administration and ITT and the Republicans in Congress to be frightened of, or whether, in fact, there is anything these people need to be so fearful about.